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Latin American Trends

STAFF NOTES

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LATIN AMERICAN TRENDS

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Argentina: Churchmen and the Junta

Catholic church leaders again appear to be having second thoughts about the lukewarm approval they expressed for the military junta some months ago.

High-ranking clerics met last week with junta members to express concern over a number of problems, chief among them the continuing abuses of human rights by elements of the security forces. The papal nuncio in Buenos Aires, who met with President Videla, told US embassy officers that unless the government soon changes its ways, there could be an "open confrontation" with the church.

Last June, seventy bishops issued a pastoral letter voicing general though not effusive support for the government. That document raised--but only very cautiously--such issues as human rights violations and hardships brought on by economic austerity measures. Since that time, however, the murders and abduction of citizens by security officials acting with virtual impunity have caused growing concern among the churchmen. The killing of seven priests in two separate incidents last July was particularly alarming.

Even in the face of such developments, however, the clerics have been loath to attack the government publicly. They have, for the most part, limited their response to private meetings like the sessions held recently. The murders of the priests in July prompted a personal confrontation between some churchmen and the government's top security official but resulted in only a relatively bland public statement from the church.

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Some churchmen argue against a break with the government because there is, of course, no guarantee that any action by the church can compel the junta to take corrective action. An open break might even prompt some officers to retaliate against church critics. Many clerics may yet conclude that, under the circumstances, it could be counterproductive to press Videla too hard or in any way to contribute to a weakening of his position. At least he is a known quantity, whose moderate preferences seem genuine, even if they do not always prevail. Were he displaced, his successor might prove even less concerned about those issues that preoccupy the church.

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